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ABSTRACT

A discussion concerning college attendance is summarized. Participants were four students and three representatives of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The two high school seniors were asked questions that focused primarily on their assessment of their high school preparation and how they envisioned their adjustment to college life. The two college freshmen were also asked about college adjustment and their high school preparation. The students attended different high schools varying in size and academic offerings. The college freshmen indicated that their biggest adjustment was how to manage their time efficiently. Students were also asked about the quality of their high school guidance counselors. Two of the students said that the counselors spent the majority of their time handling disciplinary problems. All of the students felt that they had been well served by teachers who challenged them in their academic work. (SW)

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TO : NCEE Commissioners and Staff

FROM : Antoine Garibaldi

SUBJECT: Report on DePaul breakfast conversation with students (Table 2)

This table was comprised of three commissioners -- Campbell, Francis and Haderlein, one staff -- Garibaldi, and four students -- two who had just completed their first year in college at DePaul (John Ruiz and Daniel Jazka and two who had just finished their senior year in high school (Sandra Lopez and David Patzwald). Ruiz is a computer science major at DePaul. Jazka is an accounting major at DePaul, Lopez plans to major in premed at Union College in Nebraska, and Patzwald will enter Yale in the Fall but so far has not decided on what he will major in (although he is leaning toward liberal arts).

The commissioners and staff asked the students several questions and each student had an opportunity to respond. The high school seniors were asked questions which focused chiefly on their assessment of their high school preparation and also how they envisioned their adjustment to college life. The freshmen were asked about their adjustment to college life and to judge in retrospect their high school preparation. It needs to be stated at the outset that all but one of the students appeared to be very confident and self-assured about their academic capabilities and their adjustment to college life. The one who showed signs of less confidence was Patzwald, an obviously bright student who is on his way to Yale but obviously insecure about how and whether he will fit into the social structure of the university.

All of the students attended different high schools and each different in size and academic offerings. For example, the accounting major, Jazca, indicated that even though he was now studying accounting in college, he had not taken a course in that subject in high school. Sandra Lopez, who attended a much smaller school, let the commissioners know that the school which Jazka attended (Lane) is a very large and excellent high school in Chicago. She was therefore quite surprised that the had never taken an accounting course in his high school. Patzwald also attended one of the better schools in the area, New Trier in Winnetka, where more than 80% of the students go on to college. Lopez' school, which is predominantly Hispanic, had a graduating class of 185 in comparison to the schools of Jazka and Patzwald which had classes close to 1000 students.

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To the question of how well the students' individual high schools did to prepare them for going to college, each of the them felt that they had received a good education. Both Jazka and Ruiz indicated that they had not felt that college work was not very difficult but that their biggest adjustment was how to manage their time efficiently so they would have ample time to study for their classes. Studying has been even more demanding on these two first year students since they also work while attending college. Both, however, have been fortunate to land jobs in the fields that they are studying -- Jazka, the accounting major, works 20 hours a week doing bookkeeping and Ruiz, the computer science major, has a 30 hour a week job at Radio Shack, Sandra Lopez had a great deal to say about the topic of high school preparation, but not as much for herself as for her fellow students. She indicated that much of her school is Hispanic and that many teachers didn't challenge their students enough. She expressed a concern that since Hispanic students tend "not to like school as much," that they need to be challenged much more lest they graduate with insufficient academic skills. More on this point by Lopez. Patzwald too considered the training he had received at New Trier to be excellent. He had taken two advancement placement courses and did well in them and felt that they gave him a good introduction to how college life might be. Bob Haderlein asked him if he felt any of his classmates could be classified as "illiterate" and he said no. However, the other students suggested that if they had to give some idea of the number who might be classified in that way that they would give a figure of no more than 10 percent.

All of the students were also asked about the quality of their guidance counselors in high school. Ruiz and Jatzca noted that since their high schools were so large that it was next to impossible to spend a lot of time with counselors. In their view, the guidance counselors were more responsible for the disciplinary situation of the school and thus could not spend a lot of time with students to advise them about college. Ruiz told the commissioners that he had been assigned a counselor early in his senior year but it happened that the only time during the day he was free to meet with him (the counselor) was during the counselor's lunch period! So, he resorted to slipping notes under the counselor's door to arrange another time and when that proved unsuccessful Ruiz went ahead and obtained another counselor who was able to spend more time with him. Lopez' situation was a little different. Since her school was small, it was easier to meet with the counselor but she emphasized that the student had to take the initiative rather than wait for the counselor to arrange the meeting. Jazka chimed in that his situation was much like Ruiz, a large school with very few counselors and who spent the majority of their time handling disciplinary problems.

Toward the end of the conversation, Dr. Francis asked Sandra Lopez this question: Assume for a moment that you are the teachers, the principal and counselors of your high school, what would you do differently if you were responsible for the school? Lopez' response was terse and to the point. "I would be more rigid and also compassionate." Even though only 180 out of a possible 240 students graduated from their high school, she felt that the majority of those seniors who did not graduate on time could have if more pressure had been put on them during their high school years. She acknowledged that a lot of students try to get by with only the minimal amount of effort and unfortunately there are teachers who will allow that. However, the teachers whom most students "like" and respect are those who are demanding in classes, while those who are lenient are held in less regard by students who want a good education. All of the students agreed with her statement and felt that they had been well served by teachers who challenged them in their academic work.

At the end of the discussion, Dave Patzwald asked questions of the other students and the commissioners. It seemed that one of his big concerns about going to college was the social life and whether he would be able to adjust to that situation. He also wondered whether it was ok to go to college uncertain about what he was going to major in. Dr. Francis allayed his fears about the social life suggesting to him that he could have as much of that as he wanted and that it was not necessary to be expected to participate in every social event on campus. Dave also seemed to be noticeably relieved when told by the commissioners that he has a lot of time to declare his major and that a liberal arts field is as good as any other when considering future careers.

This session was useful to the commissioners but I think also helpful to the students, especially Dave Patzwald who clearly would have liked to spend more time with the commissioners to ask them all of the many questions that are on his mind as he prepares to enter college.